

Aachener Printen – world famous biscuits from the Emperor’s city

These cake like biscuits are not just called “Printen” but “Aachener Printen”. They are unique in every respect. They are not comparable to other gingerbreads or honey cakes because they are much firmer and you can feel that when holding them in your hand. Aachener Printen are a great success because every year more than 4,500 tons of Printen dough are produced in Aachen factories and bakeries. A large part gets sent as Christmas presents or is taken into the rest of the world as souvenirs in people’s suitcases. This way the name Aachen is made known around the globe.

When bronze casters from Dinant in Belgium brought their so-called “Gebildbrot” to Aachen three hundred and fifty years ago, they may not have suspected that this would lay the foundation for the future Aachen speciality that would make the city world famous.

The arrival of the Belgium delicacy led to hectic activity amongst the Aachen baker guild. The bakers wouldn’t settle until they had found out the recipe for this new and delicious cake. In its external appearance the original Printe had a noticeable similarity with today’s “Spekulatius”. Like the Spekulatius the Printe came in various shapes. To create these shapes the raw and workable Printen dough was pressed into very finely carved wooden moulds. As a result very elaborate figures, patterns and other motives appeared. The process of the pressing, the so-called “Prenten”, is supposed to have given the cake its name.

Then Napoleon appeared on the world’s stage and with him came the Continental System. This meant the Printen bakers were cut off from their supplies of raw sugar and American wild flower honey. They were forced to improvise with substitutes like beet sugar and syrup. The use of these ingredients resulted in a much coarser and thicker dough that was harder to shape. This was the hour of the birth of the flat and slender “Cut Printe”.

This “emergency solution” was attributed to the master baker Henry Lambertz. From a visual point of view the new Printe was without doubt less effective than its predecessor. However it was to become the Printe of the future. The new design had the advantage that it could be manufactured easily. It was also much more suited for distribution and therefore able to establish new markets for the Printe.

Already by the 19th century there was not a lack of hungry customers for the Printe. The chronicle of the oldest and biggest Aachen Printen manufacturer may serve as proof for this statement. Today “Lambertz”, the inventor of the “Cut Printe”, is still the leading Printen factory. The company is proud to have supplied the royal households of Prussia, Belgium and the Netherlands as official court suppliers.

You can see a part of the craft’s history of the Printe in the café “Alt Aachener Kaffeestuben”. However until recently the “uncrowned king of the Printen bakers”, Leo van den Daele from Belgium, also created precious Printen designs that were considered to be too good to eat. Therefore they were more appreciated as a visual “delicacy”. His unique collection of Printen models, which is exhibited in the café, should really be a compulsory part of every Aachen tour.

But it was not only Van den Daele but also the other Aachen cafés and bakeries that can confront the potential Printen buyer with an overwhelming choice. Today both the original Printe, which is simple and has an unmistakable herbal taste, and also many other kinds of Printen that are decorated with nuts and almonds or with a coating of chocolate or icing sugar are extremely desirable.

Another Printen variety, the “Juicy Chocolate Printe”, a soft version, which was developed by Lambertz in 1938, has attracted a large following. However genuine Printen specialists know ways and means in order to transform the normal Printen, which are rather hard, over night into pleasantly soft delicacies. If you play your cards right you may be able to get the odd tip from the baker’s wife.

But this is not all the Printen news. The Printe has found its way into the Aachen kitchens as well. For everybody who likes the taste of the Printe here is a recommendation: Try a “Rheinischer Sauerbraten” (braised beef marinated in vinegar, prepared the Rhineland way) according to an Aachen recipe. This will come with a delicious sauce, which has been aromatically refined and thickened with the help of Printen crumbs. And if you really want to get a glimpse of the Printen heaven, indulge yourself with a special pudding – Printen ice cream just melts on your tongue...

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